

Work-Based Learning for Students with Disabilities

Question: *My child is 17, has an IEP, and wishes to participate in a “Work-Based Learning Program” at high school. What do we need to know?*

Answer: A work-based learning program provides the opportunity for students with disabilities to learn through work. Work-based learning programs can include youth apprenticeships, paid and unpaid work experience, cooperative education, job shadowing, business and industry mentoring, simulated work tasks at school or through vocational student organizations, school-based enterprises, and community service. A student is required to spend some time in the classroom when participating in a work-based learning program.

There are ways for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, which includes you and usually your child, to determine if work-based learning is appropriate. Special education evaluation is the first step. At age 17, your child should have had a thorough transition evaluation to identify strengths, abilities, interests, and needs. Whenever possible, talk with him or her about what the evaluation says and if you both believe that it is accurate. This is a time when your child should be involved every step of the way with you, the parent, in a supporting and involved role.

There are several things to consider about a work-based program

A work-based learning program offers opportunities to students.

- Through work experience, students can apply what they learn in school to the work world. It links them to “the real world.”
- It gives students an opportunity to try various careers on a day-to-day basis. The exposure can help them identify what career choices they want—or do not want—to pursue.
- The experience can introduce students to adults who may act as mentors and positive role models. The connections can boost self-esteem and encourage networking into a wider community of support.
- The program may prevent students from dropping out of school by making the daily educational experience more meaningful and interesting.

Work-based learning programs should be individualized to suit a student’s needs, preferences, and interests.

- A student’s disability could have an affect on the type of work he or she might do. For example, one student may need a quiet work environment, while another needs freedom to move about. One student may like repetitive tasks, but another may want variety.
- It is important to identify supports or accommodations a student may need in the workplace.
- With limited school hours and scheduling constraints, a work-based program may affect individual student’s involvement in the regular education curriculum.
- The student and parents will want to find out if participation in the work-based program will limit the student’s post-secondary school options.

The Minnesota Department of Education and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 lists requirements for a work-based learning program.

Parents and young adults should know that work-based learning teachers must be appropriately licensed by the state of Minnesota. For example, if a special education teacher supervises students in community-based activities for more than 40 hours, she or he must hold the Teacher Coordinator of Work-Based Learning license or equivalent.

Other state requirements include:

A Classroom Component

- Classroom work must connect learning at school with the work program.
- It has to reinforce general work skills and behaviors necessary for successful employment.
- It must provide adequate safety instruction to supplement that provided at the worksite.
- It has to provide information regarding all aspects of the student’s chosen business or industry and opportunities for career advancement within the chosen field.

A Community-Based Component

- Employment sites must provide for a variety of learning experiences appropriate for each student’s interest and developmental level.

- Students must be paid, unless they are providing a general community service that does not provide benefit to a specific employer.
- Sub-minimum wage rules apply when a student cannot perform at a reasonable level expected for the specific job.

A Training Plan

- A plan to identify what learning will take place in the classroom must be developed before work begins.
- Training plans must be signed by the student, parent (unless the student is 18 years old and no guardian is involved), employer, and representative from the school district.

A Training Agreement

- The agreement is signed with each employer specifying the conditions under which students will work.
- It outlines instructional responsibility of the school.
- It outlines instructional responsibility of the employer.

Consider what other agencies may be involved.

Work-based learning programs symbolize the transition of students from school to workplaces and the community. As families consider the work-based learning option, they may wish to think about coordination of services beyond school and the IEP team. The broader focus includes identifying additional agencies that may be responsible for providing or paying for current or future transition services to the student. Agencies could include state Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies, job training partnership providers, community colleges, or vocational/technical training institutions, and county social services.

Questions for students (and their parents) to ask about work-based learning programs

Evaluation

- Does the transition evaluation identify my needs accurately and complete?
- What is a vocational assessment and who will be assessing me?
- What career options interest me?

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

- What is my long-term vision? Does the IEP's Present Level of Educational Performance statement reflect it?
- Do the goals and objectives on the IEP address my career goals?

- On what functional and academic skills do I need to work on to attain the career choice? For example, do I need to improve social skills or become more fluent in math?
- What type of work experience do I need before graduation?
- How much supervision will I need?
- Do I understand my disability and have the ability to be a self-advocate at school and the workplace?
- Will the work-based learning program make recommendations for future work choices?

Accommodations and Modifications

- Do I need assistive technology at school or at the work place?
- What support or accommodations will I need in the workplace?
- How will transportation to the work site be provided?

Progress

- Who will monitor classroom progress?
- Who will monitor worksite progress?
- How will progress information be shared with me?
- How will what I say about this work experience be used?

In summary, a work-based learning program can provide an opportunity for students with disabilities to learn through work. When parents and students are involved and ask questions, the experience is more likely to be successful.

Additional PACER Center Transition Resources

- “Mapping Your Dreams”: Series of transition folders addressing five areas of challenge for young adults with disabilities. The topics include employment, education, home living, community involvement, and recreation and leisure.
- NCSET Parent Briefs: Series of articles of interest to parents of young adults with disabilities.
- “Transition and Beyond...Now What?": This book gives families practical ideas for transition to life after high school.
- Also see PACER Center Articles available online at www.PACER.org